

## Kallu by Ismat Chughtai

Although not quite seven, Kallu did the work of grown man. He was shaken out of his sleep early in the morning and, dressed only in an old, tattered shirt in winter with Abba's old woollen cap pulled down over his ears, looking like a midget, dripping at the nose, he promptly set to work. Scared off by the cold water, he was always reluctant to wash his face, and just once in a while he would carelessly rub the tips of his fingers over his teeth which remained permanently coated with a thin film of mildew.

The first thing he did in the morning was to get the stove going. Then he put water on for tea, set the table for breakfast and made a hundred rounds to the door and back carrying butter, bread, then milk and, finally, the eggs—flapping his slippers noisily, he travelled to the kitchen innumerable times. And after the cook had prepared breakfast, Kallu made more trips to the table lugging hot toast and parathas. To ensure their good health, the children (nearly all of whom were Kallu's age), were forcibly fed porridge, milk, eggs, toast and jam while Kallu quietly looked on. When breakfast was over he sat alone in the kitchen and ate left-over burnt ends of toast and paratha, hurriedly downing them with some tea.

His next task involved taking care of small errands around the house: he polished Maliha bi's pumps, scouted for Hamida bi's ribbons, located Akhtar Bhai's socks, recovered Salima bi's book-bag, fetched Mumani Jan's katha from the almirah, and retrieved Abu's cigarette case from beside his pillow. In short, he spun around like a top until everyone had left for either the office or school. Later, he washed Nanhi's dirty diapers, and then settled down to play with Safia bi; in between he made trips to the front door to receive mail from the mailman or to inquire the name of a visitor at the door. Around midday the cook handed him peas to shell or spinach to rinse. At lunch time he repeatedly dashed to the dining table with hot rotis, giving the baby's cradle a little push every now and then on the way. What more can I say? He came to this household at a very young age, did the work of a bearer and sweeper, and all this for two rupees a month along with some old, ragged cast-offs. His mother lived in the village and had entrusted him to our care; he would at least have enough to eat, she thought. She herself worked as a cook for the village zamindar.

She visited him sometimes usually at the Teej festival, and brought him molasses and parched wheat or fried corn. She too put him to work.

‘Dear boy, come here and scratch my back.’

‘Son, bring me some water.’

‘Get some roti from the kitchen, son. And ask the cook for a little dal as well.’

‘Rub down my back boy.’

‘Rub my shoulders.’

‘Massage my head.’

The truth was, his little hands executed a great foot massage, and once he started you didn’t want him to stop; often he would have to continue massaging the entire afternoon. Sometimes he dozed off and fell on your legs. A kick was generally enough to awaken him.

Kallu had no time to play. If, for some reason, he had a little respite between errands, he would be found slumped with exhaustion, silently staring into space like an idiot. Seeing him sitting like this, looking so foolish, someone or the other would stick a straw in his ear surreptitiously, and startled, he would bashfully turn to a task that required his attention.

Preparations for Maliha bi’s wedding were under way. There was talk of weddings all day long—who’s going to marry whom, how did so-and-so marry so-and-so, and who should marry whom. ‘Who’re you going to marry, Nanhi?’ Mumani would jokingly ask.

‘Apa,’ lisped Nanhi, sending everyone into fits of laughter.

‘Who’re you going to marry, Kallu?’ Amma asked in jest one day.

Kallu revealed his yellow teeth in a shy grin. When he was pressed for an answer he lowered his eyes and whispered, ‘Salima bi.’

‘May you rot in hell! You stupid fool! A curse on your face!’ Peeved by the laughter around her, Mumani proceeded to box Kallu’s ears.

Then one day, while he and Salima were playing, Kallu asked her, ‘Salima bi, will you marry me?’

‘Yes ... es,’ Salima nodded vigorously, her little head bobbing up and down.

Mumani, sitting in the sunny part of the courtyard, combing her hair, was privy to this exchange between Kallu and her daughter. Livid with anger, she removed her sandal from her foot and smacked him one with it. A blow landed in the wrong place, Kallu’s nose began to bleed and soon blood was streaming down the side of his face. Kallu’s mother, who was visiting at the time, saw the blood and screamed that her son had been murdered.

‘Get out of my house, you hypocrite!’ Mumani yelled and ordered both mother and son out. Kallu’s mother wept and begged forgiveness, but her pleas went unheeded.

The years went by swiftly. As with the servant who came after him, Kallu too was forgotten. Maliha was now a mother. Hamida bi never married. Half the family had migrated to Pakistan, the other half remained here in India. Nanhi, Safia and Salima, having completed their education, were now waiting to get married. But husbands were difficult to come by.

Our uncle, Chacha Mian, was constantly on the lookout for eligible young men. He moved in official circles and had arranged a match for Maliha, but he too was helpless now. These were bad times; nice young men were nearly impossible to find, and those who were around demanded that a car and fare to England be included in the dowry. Such demands could be taken into consideration only if there was one girl in the family to be wed. But here there were many. Also, the loss of land had resulted in a lowering of status and income, and there were no parties any more, no fancy get-togethers; how were young girls to meet, eligible young bachelors? Nonetheless, if a rare party did come around, Chacha Mian saw to it that the girls attended. And so when a dinner was held in honour of Mr. Din, the new Deputy Collector, preparations in our house began several days in advance.

Mr. Din was a bachelor, and the eyes of all the mothers of unwed girls in the city were focused on him. We were stunned when we saw him. He was over six feet tall, had a wheatish complexion, very attractive features, and teeth which shone like real pearls. During introductions, he suddenly quietened at the mention of Salima's name and then quickly moved away from our group to chat with the other guests.

Chacha Mian approached us with an expression of bafflement on his face just as we were getting ready to leave.

'Do you know who this Mr. Din is?' he asked.

'The Deputy Collector, who else' Mumani answered gruffly.,

'No, no. I mean, did you recognize him? My dear, he's our own Kallu.'

'Kallu?' Mumani crinkled her nose.

'Yes, yes Kallu. Kalimuddin. This is too much!'

'You mean that little midget who was our houseboy?'

'Yes, the very same, the one who suffered a beating at your hands.' Chacha Mian guffawed.

'My God! What's wrong with the government? It seems just about anyone can land a job with it these days! But how did this happen?'

‘Why not? He’s a Qureshi, that’s a good caste, and he even submitted to your beating when the need arose,’ my mother said in a mocking tone.

‘Well, in that case why don’t you give him your daughter in marriage?’ Mumani spoke archly.

‘I wish my daughters were so fortunate,’ Amma said. ‘I’d be only too happy to have him for a son-in law. But why would he want to have anything to do with a family at whose hands he suffered such humiliation? Ayesha, his mother, left him with us so he could become somebody. But you turned him into a servant.’

Chacha Mian said, ‘And the poor woman worked hard, sewed clothes, washed people’s dirty dishes and finally succeeded in raising him to such heights. People are willing to present him their daughters on a silver platter.’

‘May they perish who do—I don’t need him,’ said Mumani sullenly.

One day Chacha Mian arrived at our house in his usual state of nervous agitation.

‘We were at the club, talking, and before I knew it, Kalimauddin walked out of there with me as I was leaving. Make some tea, anything!’

Amma ran towards the kitchen, but Mumani, a grimace firmly set on her face, didn’t budge. The girls became pale; Salima was especially perturbed. We wondered whether ‘Kalim Saheb’ should be asked to come in or the ladies be sent to the lawn, or Chacha Mian be allowed to handle everything by himself.

‘He’s here for revenge,’ Maliha said with mock seriousness, and Mumani shivered. Salima’s face was drained of colour.

‘I don’t care what happens,’ Amma said, He’s here, which means he’s a decent person, and we should respond with the same sort of generosity.’

‘No, I don’t want to be humiliated,’ Mumani growled. ‘you are welcome to take your own girls—none of mine is going to stir from here. He’s just here to show of his superiority.’

‘I won’t go either. I’m already married,’ Maliha said with a laugh.

Finally it was decided that we would all go and, of Mumani’s daughters, only Maliha would accompany us.

What’s he going to think, such uncivilized people!’ Upset and bewildered, Chacha Mian started grumbling.

We arrived in the lawn to find ‘Kalim Saheb’ engaged in a lively conversation about the past with the old gardener, who smiled sheepishly, somewhat embarrassed, a little uncomfortable.

‘Midu chacha, remember how you used to holler, ‘Wate...er!’ at the front door and immediately I used to pull a sheet in front of Dulhan bi3 (that’s what he called Mumani) for purdah? Tell me truthfully, did you ever sneak a look through the sheet?’ he burst into laughter, and then seeing us approach, quickly turned to greet us.

While we were having tea he said, ‘Maliha bi, do you remember how you boxed my ears for not brushing my teeth regularly?’

Maliha blushed.

‘No matter how unpleasant one’s childhood has been, one always remembers it like a wonderful dream,’ he said. ‘All of you probably forgot about me, but I didn’t forget you.’

We talked for a long time afterwards, shared jokes and laughed. His carefree manner put us at ease in no time.

‘Give my regards to Dulhan bi,’ he said before he left.

‘She’s not felling well,’ Maliha lied.

He laughed, ‘Forgive me, but I have a very sharp memory. I remember that when Dulhan bi was angry with someone she took ill. Well, I have to go, I have a dinner engagement tonight. I’ll come again another time.’

We talked about ‘Kalim Saheb’ late into the night.

‘What if he proposes...’ Chacha Mian spoke with some hesitation.

‘He’d better stay away from my girls,’ Mumani retorted curtly.

‘Why?’ Amma was irritated.

‘Because I say so!’

This was all artifice on her part; only God knew what was really going on in Mumani’s heart.

Salima became tearful. Everyone had been teasing her.

A month passed. We had almost forgotten about ‘Kalim Saheb’ when suddenly he arrived at our house one day with Chacha Mian. This time Chacha Mian informed only Maliha and myself of his presence in the lawn.

‘He wants to see his crochety Dulhan bi,’ Chacha Mian said.

‘And she won’t let him come near her.’

We decided that since Mumani would never agree to a meeting voluntarily, the best course of action would be to just bring him in and surprise her.

‘My dears, she’s a witch! There’ll be no place to hide my face if she insults him.’ Chacha Mian spoke fearfully.

‘Don’t worry,’ Maliha said, ‘she’s not a child. I’ll go and get her and you bring him in.’

Our hearts beat uncontrollably. What if Mumani exploded like a bomb? Except for Maliha and me, all the other girls disappeared into the house. ‘Kalim Saheb’ walked into the room to find Mumani engrossed in cleaning her paan dan; her back was turned to him.

‘Maliha, listen girl, get me the bowl of katha from the cupboard in the kitchen, will you,’ she called out.

He took the bowl of katha from Maliha and handed it to Mumani. She extended her a hand towards it and said, And some water, too.’

Just then she lifted her eyes and found him standing by her side. ‘Adab’. He whispered the salutation nervously and kept his eyes glued to the floor.

‘God bless you,’ she responded in a deadened tone and started spooning out katha from the bowl.

‘Are you well?’

‘I am fine, with your blessing.’

‘Why are you standing? Sit down,’ she ordered dryly.

He sat on the far side of the charpoy, on the adwan.

‘Oh-ho! Not there, you will break the adwan!’ she yelled. He jumped up hastily.

When ‘Kalim Saheb’ sent a message requesting Salima’s hand in marriage, she was unrelenting. ‘Come hell or high water, I won’t give him Salima,’ she said.

‘But why?’ Chacha Mian and the others pressed for a reason.

‘Who’re you to ask? I’ve decided I won’t and that’s that!’ she said obstinately.

‘Kalim Saheb’ said he hadn’t take no from life and he wasn’t going to take no from the old lady either. Determined to get his way, he boldly stationed himself on a chair next to Mumani’s bed one day. All of us gathered around them with great interest, as if a fight between two wrestlers in a ring was about to commence. ‘I’m going to make myself very clear’, he spoke firmly.

Mumani frowned.

‘You’re turning the tables on him, Dulhan bi—that’s not fair,’ Chacha Mian interjected.

‘Don’t say anything, Chacha Mian, I’ll take care of this myself.’

‘Kalim Saheb’ brushed Chacha Mian aside and turned to Mumani. ‘At least tell me what my crime is, Dulhan bi?’ he complained.

‘Dulhan bi! Hunh! As long as you call me Dulhan bi...’ Mumani muttered indignantly.

‘Amma bi ...’ he began in a tearful voice. Mumani’s eyes also filled with tears. She began scolding us.

‘Is this a circus? Why are you standing around watching like idiots? I know these girls won’t be any help with the wedding arrangements. I’ll have to take care of everything myself, as usual. Useless, these girls are, good-for-nothing!’

Mumani’s cantankerous chastisement fell upon our ears like the sound of wedding trumpets.

**Pumps:** light flat shoes without fastenings.

**Katha:** catechu, a brown paste made from the tree acacia catechu, spread on betel leaves as an ingredient of paan.

**Paan dan:** ornamental box containing the ingredients for making paan.

**Adwan:** the strings at the foot of a charpoy or cot, by which the cross-strings are tightened.

**Dulhan:** Bride.

### About Ismat Chughtai

1915–91 / She was a born rebel. She led an unconventional life, went in for higher education, took up a job, lived alone, married a man of her choice and was cremated, as she had desired, instead of being buried.

After Rasheed Jahan, she was the first Muslim woman to write novels and short stories in Urdu. Rasheed Jahan was Chughtai's mentor. In 1932, Rasheed Jahan, along with Sajjad Zaheer, Ahmad Ali and Mahmuduzzafar published a collection of short stories, *Angaray* (Embers) that set off a storm of protest in the local press. The maulvis issued fatwahs and the book was banned by the United Provinces government. In the wake of the agitation against *Angaray*, Sajjad Zaheer took up residence in London in March 1933. The 'Defence of *Angaray*' was published soon afterwards (in April 1933) by the *Angaray* group in which they announced the formation of the League of Progressive Authors. The first manifesto of the progressive writers' movement was drafted by Mulk Raj Anand and Sajjad Zaheer in London and the movement formally launched as the All India Progressive Writers' Association (AIPWA) at a conference held in 1936 in Lucknow, under the presidentship of the Hindi-Urdu writer Premchand. The League of Progressive Authors now came under the banner of the AIPWA. Soon the movement spread and literary figures from other Indian languages (Uma Shankar Joshi, Tarashankar Bannerjee, K. Shivrama Karanth, Sumitranandan Pant, Suryakant Tripathi 'Nirala') began to be associated with it. The Progressive Writers' Movement encouraged a lot of new talents; Chughtai was one of them.

Chughtai wrote many stories before she was actually published in 1939. With a keen eye and an incisive intelligence she looked into the lives of a whole range of Muslim women from the middle class in the suburban towns of Uttar Pradesh. Her stories were often controversial. 'Lihaaf' (1942) which deals with the issue of women's sexual desire was charged with obscenity. It led to a trial that lasted four years at the end of which she was finally acquitted. Ismat Chughtai was an important figure of the 1940s literary scene.

She also wrote for films and much later, even acted in one— she played the role of the grandmother in *Junoon* (1978). Having married Shaheed Latif, the film-producer remembered for *Ziddi* (1948), Dev Anand's first film to win immense popularity, Chughtai was involved with this and many of his other films like *Arzoo* (1950), *Darwaza* (1954), *Society* (1955) and *Sone Ki Chidiya* (1958). Several of her stories have been made into films. Of these, *Garam Hawa* (1973) won a great deal of acclaim. She is, therefore, also a part of the complex relationship that existed between Indian cinema and the progressive writers in Urdu: many of the younger writers of the time—Manto, Sardar Ali Jafri, Kaifi Azmi, Sahir Ludhianvi, Majrooh Sultanpuri—wrote for films.

In 1975, she received the Padma Shri for her contribution to Urdu Literature.